

THAILAND SPA HIDEAWAYS

There are only a handful of destinations in the world that have managed to solidly weld their names to the delights found within their spas, bath-houses or wellness retreats—countries where no visit may be called complete without having spent some time basking in treatments that leave body and mind rejuvenated and radiant.

Swedish massages are, of course, a topic of legend; Turkey, with its incomparable baths that invigorate a weary body under a haze of scalding water and steam ranks right up there; and—although lying in a green cranny of Southeast Asia that's the yin to the yang to Sweden's nippy frostiness and a direct opposite to the barren, dusty dryness of Turkey—Thailand has rightfully placed itself among the "must" destinations for those who seek haven in spas where Asian therapeutic techniques are blended with the alluring scent of tropical flowers.

No one should come to Thailand without spending at least a few hours unwinding in the reflective, soothing and balmy atmosphere of its spas.

Bangkok—the immense capital city bedeviled by noise and traffic—probably has thousands of first-rate spas, turning the destination something akin to the proverbial candy store for spa buffs. But head-and-shoulders above the others stands **RARINJINDA WELLNESS SPA** (rarinjinda.com), a luxurious nest on the eighth floor of the **GRANDE CENTRE POINT HOTEL** in the heart of the city, where one just may find the best treatments in Bangkok.

This day spa shines with a signature practice called *Elements of Life*, consisting of treatments involving fire, water and aromas; its *Ayurvedic Hide Away* is based on ancient Sanskrit techniques that massage body spots where muscles and joints meet, inducing a trancelike state of relaxation. *Rarinjinda* also offers idyllic hot stone massages and hydrotherapy treatments and, of course, the *Classic Thai Massage* that uses pressure, instead of kneading like in Sweden, to restore overwrought and tense muscles to their normal condition.

The aroma treatment is also extraordinary and conducive to make a person feel re-energized. It's no wonder that *Rarinjinda* consistently has been ranked by international spa enthusiasts as offering the best spa experience in the most luxurious wellness retreat in Bangkok.

According to Narun Wiwattanakra, assistant executive director of marketing and public relations for the **BLOOMING SPA GROUP**, *Rarinjinda's* parent company, "The success of our spas speak for itself and our growth reflects our success. Currently, we have spas in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. A third is due to open in Phuket's Patong Beach this month."

Wiwattanakra adds that *Rarinjinda* is extremely popular with Asian visitors, "but our branch is beginning to make in-roads in U.S. and European markets.

"We have positioned ourselves as 'affordable luxuries,' given that our product and services are on a par, or above, services

found in five-star hotels, but our price is approximately half of what you'd pay in five-star properties."

Indeed, a *Classic Thai Massage* runs approximately \$60, far less than in other comparable luxury spas, and a ridiculously low figure when compared with state-side prices.

Searching for a one-of-its-kind spa in Thailand is easy if you're traveling to Khanom Bay. Here the **AAVA RESORT AND SPA** (aavaresort.com) is putting this remote, off-the-beaten path resort on the map for the magnificent treatments and its distinctive architectural touches.

The place has been described as looking as "cool as a Finlandia martini," which is exactly what its Finnish owners intended when they assigned the task of designing the place to a Thai architect who borrowed heavily from Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, one of the founders of Nordic modernism.

Aava is a true example of chic minimalism. In many ways, the place is strictly Thai, but the Northern European roots of its owners are evidenced by its interior design, which was mapped by Finnish decorators.

Here, spa lovers can delight in treatments—oddly enough, the place features a Finnish sauna in the midst of what may be the most hot and humid zone in Thailand—comparable to the best in the country.

Adding to its appeal is the fact that Khanom, a stop for the tourist-laden ferry to Koh Samui, is within easy reach of waterfalls and rainforest while abutting an impossibly blue bay with fine sand beaches and coves custom-made for great diving.

Aava, which has a highly rated restaurant, also offers Thai cooking classes and diving trips. There are also picnics on nearby uninhabited islets, where pink dolphins can often be seen carousing over the water, making it one of the finest spa retreats in Thailand.

But perhaps one of the most innovative and excellent spas in Thailand is **BANYAN TREE** (baryantreespa.com), a Thai success story that began about seven years ago and has been exported to other countries, including Japan, China, Indonesia and the Maldives.

The Bangkok branch, located on the top floors of the Thai Wah Tower, and part of the **BANYAN TREE BANGKOK** resort, is a secluded, luxurious and pampering retreat that seems far from the hectic pace of the city. This spa offers what may be the most pleasurable treatments in a dazzling, elegant and soporific setting.

Its signature treatment is called *Royal Banyan Herbal Pouch Massage*, a technique that blends Western and Asian methods designed to relax the muscles and improve blood circulation. A highly skilled therapist uses a pouch dipped in warm sesame oil and other spices to massage tired and aching spots.

Another popular Banyan Tree treatment is *The Rainmist Experience*, which begins with a combination of soft rain, steam and a full shower and ends with an indulgent massage sure to relax body and mind. ☼